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RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 003184

STATE FOR OES/PCI, OES/IHB, AND SCA/INS  
STATE FOR STAS, AIAG  
STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS  
HHS PASS TO NIH  
STATE PASS TO USAID  
PASS TO HHS/OGHA (STEIGER/ABDOO/VALDEZ), CDC (BLOUNT/FARRELL),  
NIH/FIC (GLASS/MAMPILLY/HANDLEY), FDA (LUMPKIN/WELSCH, GENEVA FOR  
HOFMAN)  
PASS TO MAS/DAS/JESTRADA  
PASS TO MAC/DAS/HVINEYARD

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [AMED](#) [CASC](#) [KSCA](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [BEXP](#) [EINV](#) [TSPL](#)  
SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK IN ASSAM AND WEST BENGAL

REF A: KOLKATA 328  
REF B: KOLKATA 11

11. (U) SUMMARY: The Government of India has confirmed outbreaks of H5N1 Avian Influenza in the states of Assam and West Bengal. State and Central Government response has been quick and effective with culling operations underway in all locations. There are currently no confirmed cases of H5N1 in humans and human surveillance has begun in the affected areas. The economic impact of the recent outbreaks has already been felt and is expected to be both long-lasting and severe. END SUMMARY.

12. This cable incorporates reporting from ConGen Kolkata, ConGen Chennai, and FAS, USAID, HHS, and State at Embassy New Delhi.

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OUTBREAK IN ASSAM  
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13. (U) The first outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Assam was reported on November 27, 2008 (Ref A). As of December 16, the Department of Animal Health, Dairy and Fisheries (DADF), a division of the GOI Ministry of Agriculture (MoAG), officially confirmed outbreaks of HPAI in Kamrup (Rural), Kamrup (Metro), Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Barpeta and Chirang districts which are contiguous to one another and border the Brahmaputra river. DADF also confirmed AI in the district of Dibrugarh, which is located 600 kilometers away in the northeastern corner of the state. Dibrugarh also borders the Brahmaputra river. The non-contiguous locations of the confirmed outbreak sites support a theory that migratory wildfowl may be the carrier for the virus in Assam. Most of the outbreaks have been reported in backyard poultry except for one outbreak in a government managed "Central Chick Rearing Farm" in Kamrup district. The poultry population in Assam is around 21.7 million, making it the sixth largest state in terms of poultry population.

14. (U) The Assam state government has mobilized resources at the

state and district level to contain the outbreak. The state Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department, specifically the Secretary, is coordinating the state-level response and equipping, manning and directing the 400-500 Rapid Reaction Teams that are working in the affected districts. According to official GOI statistics, 886 nimal Health workers, all on chemoprophylaxis, have been deployed in the effort. Local district collectors are facilitating the administrative logistics of the culling, combing, mopping, and sanitizing operations. As of December 15, 337,582 birds have been culled in Assam.

15. (SBU) Poloff met with a district collector on December 12 who noted the state government is culling birds (chickens, ducks, geese) within three kilometers of an outbreak and restricting movement of birds (effectively a quarantine) within 10 kilometers. Cash compensation is paid on the spot to individuals whose birds are culled, with commercial operations receiving payment the following day. The district collector also stated several districts had begun trial night-time combing operations in order to catch offenders, particularly backyard poultry cultivators, who fail to present their birds for culling. No compensation is paid to producers whose birds are restricted within the three to ten kilometer quarantine zone.

16. (SBU) Poloff also visited one of the outdoor poultry markets in the state capitol of Guwahati, which is located in the Kamrup (Urban) district. According to one of the merchants, a ban on poultry sales has been in effect since November 25 and on eggs since December 9. He stated the government would re-assess the ban on December 20. The merchant said he understood the seriousness of the issue as well as the need for government action to contain the outbreak, but questioned the lack of any government compensation for lost revenue for the merchants who are dependent on sales for their

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livelihoods. He noted that chicken was unavailable on the black market and Poloff observed that while chicken had been available on December 11 at one of the three star hotels in Guwahati, on December 12 it was off the menu. In addition Kingfisher airline flights to and from Guwahati have removed chicken from their in-flight menus.

17. (SBU) On December 12, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi called a meeting of ministers and state and district officials to assess the state government's response to the AI outbreak. According to a participant, CM Gogoi acknowledged the seriousness of the AI outbreak and expressed confidence in his government's ability to address the situation. A concrete result of the meeting was the state government's decision to double the compensation paid for culled chickens from USD 0.80 (Rs 40) to USD 1.60 (Rs 80) in order to approximate market prices.

18. (SBU) Politicians from all political parties, both government and opposition, told Poloff that they understood the seriousness of the outbreak and the importance of "nipping it in the bud". In a private conversation on December 12 the leader of the opposition in the Assam state assembly told Poloff he had no intention of politicizing the government's response to Avian Influenza.

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OUTBREAK IN WEST BENGAL  
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19. (U) On December 16 the DADF confirmed the outbreak of HPAI in West Bengal's Budhia-Kola village located in the northern district of Malda. The district is located 350 kilometers north of Kolkata and borders the Indian states of Jharkand and Bihar in addition to Bangladesh. The Government of West Bengal (GoWB) began culling operations on December 16. As of December 18, there are no figures as to how many birds have already been culled but GoWB estimates indicate approximately 20,000 poultry will be culled by December

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CENTRAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE  
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10. (U) In addition to Assam and West Bengal, the MoAG has issued

orders to the neighboring states of Tripura and Meghalaya to follow strategic AI control measures according to the National Action Plan for Preparedness, Control and Containment of AI which is available at the following link: <http://dahd.nic.in/flu/BIRD%20FLU.pdf>. As of December 18, there have been no reports of an outbreak in Tripura. However, Health Attach learned that HPAI has been found in Meghalaya although the extent of the outbreak is unknown. A portion of the three kilometer culling zone surrounding the outbreak at Assam's Central Chick Rearing Farm falls within the territorial confines of Meghalaya which has been instructed to initiate culling and surveillance operations accordingly. Poloff confirms that Government of Meghalaya officials are in contact and exchanging information with their Assam counterparts. The MoAG has not identified a virus vector or the likely source of infection though officials have speculated migratory wildfowl may be responsible for the Assam and West Bengal outbreaks.

¶11. (U) In a new development, the GOI has split the AI outbreak sample investigation workload between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). In the past, all suspected H5N1 samples were sent to MoAG's High Security Animal Disease Laboratory (HSADL) in Bhopal. The GOI has now decided the samples should be shared between HSADL and MoHFW's Institute of Virology in Pune.

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NO CONFIRMED CASES OF HUMAN H5N1 INFECTION  
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¶12. (U) According to the MoHFW's latest official report dated December 15, 2008, no cases of AI have been detected in humans. A senior official at MoHFW informed Health Attach that human surveillance in the AI affected states has commenced and includes active house to house surveillance by approximately 498 health workers. As of December 17, 125,241 people living within three kilometers of each outbreak epicenter have been examined. An additional 122,616 people living within a three to ten kilometer radius of each epicenter have also been examined. The human surveillance has revealed 104 cases of Upper Respiratory Infection with fever though no confirmed HPAI and none of the 104 cases have a history of handling dead or sick birds. The MoHFW has deployed approximately 20,000 capsules of Tamiflu, 9000 surgical masks, 900 sets of personal protective equipment, 300 N-95 masks and five ventilators with an additional 10,000 Tamiflu capsules and three ventilators to follow. In addition, UNICEF has distributed local language print and media material, jointly developed with MoHFW, regarding AI and human and animal health for public distribution.

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ECONOMIC IMPACT OF AI IN INDIA  
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¶13. (SBU) As the AI outbreaks are still continuing in Assam and West Bengal, it is too early to fully assess the economic damage. Initial data from the Poultry Federation of India indicates there has been a drop of approximately 30 percent in the per kg price of broilers (live weight) across the country due to the outbreaks in Assam. However, the latest outbreaks come on the heels of a November 4 GOI declaration to the International Animal Health Organization that India is "AI free" referring to the previous multiple 2008 outbreaks, the first of which was confirmed on January 15, 2008 (Ref B). According to the DADF's official order, a total of 42 outbreaks were reported up to May 16, 2008, with the last occurring in West Bengal's Darjeeling district.

¶14. (SBU) The previous outbreaks led several Gulf countries as well as Bhutan and Pakistan to impose a prohibition on the import of poultry and poultry products from India. As a result, trade losses alone were more than \$25 million. According to industry sources, the previous outbreaks caused more than \$132 million in industry-wide losses. Bankruptcy and consolidation has occurred in some of the smaller poultry operations in southern India and the larger commercial poultry integrators in Tamil Nadu are facing severe financial losses as a result of the trade bans. The director

of a large poultry farm in Tamil Nadu told Econoff the import bans, particularly on eggs, have already cost Tamil Nadu poultry farms approximately USD 500,000. The key markets for these products are the Gulf countries. In addition, the National Egg Coordination Committee, the cartel that sets egg prices, has lowered egg prices from USD 0.041 (INR 2.05) to USD 0.038 (INR 1.9) as the market gets flooded with eggs that are now non-exportable.

¶15. (SBU) Considering the relative isolation of Assam and West Bengal from other poultry production areas in India, coupled with the fact that North/Central Indian poultry production is mainly for the domestic market, it would appear India would want to declare regionalization or compartmentalization of AI outbreaks in order to protect it's AI free South India poultry producers. However, senior MoAg officials have indicated that all such industry requests for compartmentalization have been turned down.

¶16. (U) The poultry industry claims that there is no major impact on domestic poultry consumption as the majority of consumers are now well aware that properly handled and cooked poultry meat is safe for consumption. That said, the Poultry Federation of India is working with the Indian Medical Association to launch an AI awareness campaign among consumers.

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NO REQUESTS FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE  
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¶17. (SBU) The GOI has not requested any direct assistance from the USG and in conversations with Emboffs, has indicated they anticipate being able to handle the current outbreaks without difficulty. WHO-India however has requested USAID to assist them in obtaining AI outbreak information from Bangladesh.

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COMMENT  
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¶18. (SBU) There are no official or unofficial reports regarding a causal link between the Assam and West Bengal AI outbreaks, although the timing and the fact the H5N1 virus is of an identical strain leads to the possibility. The Assam and West Bengal state governments have moved quickly, at all levels, to contain the outbreaks. Government, business, and civil society are supporting pro-active culling measures. In addition, the Government of Assam's decision to increase compensation for culled birds should increase backyard poultry's voluntary participation in culling activities. It remains to be seen whether West Bengal will follow suit. However, a potential weakness in the government response is the lack of a compensation mechanism for "quarantined farms" or for poultry marketplace sellers. Without their inclusion in some type of compensation scheme, there exists an economic incentive to engage in illegal poultry sales thereby threatening the ability to contain the outbreak. In addition, although human case surveillance is active around the outbreak epicenters, human influenza surveillance in Assam, West Bengal, and India in general is weak.

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